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Gardner-Webb Student's Photography Recently Honored at Conference

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Office of University Communications

March 19, 2013

Junior Heather Pendergraft Snaps Winning Shot of Hockey Players at Southwestern Photojournalism Event

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – The thought of winning a photography contest never crossed her mind. As a participant in the annual Southwestern Photojournalism Conference in Fort Worth, Texas, Gardner-Webb photojournalism major Heather Pendergraft (Stanley, N.C.) was simply excited to absorb information from some of the world's most elite and accomplished photographers. But as they often do, one of life's finest moments took her by complete surprise when her photo was chosen as the winner of more than 100 student submissions.

"Every professional that I talked to said to practice, practice, practice," Pendergraft shared. "You have to keep going and set your work apart from everyone else. Each person has their own style. I definitely have to work on my niche."

Dr. Bob Carey, chair of the communication studies department at Gardner-Webb, served as a staff liaison for the conference, which was attended by recent GWU alumna Rebekah Rausch and current students Jessica Hibbard, Amanda Smith, and Pendergraft.

Currently a junior, Pendergraft is most interested in pursuing a career in sports photography. She was thrilled when a pre-conference event placed her in a small group with famed sports journalism photographer Dave Black, whose work has been featured numerous times in "Sports Illustrated." The group shadowed a junior league hockey team and students were even given an opportunity to take photos on the ice. Following their workshop experiences in which each student snapped hundreds of images, participants sifted through the shots and industry professionals helped them select four or five photos to be considered for the student photography contest. Out of all of the submissions, Pendergraft's photo of a hockey player scoring a goal as the goalie narrowly misses blocking the puck was ultimately chosen as the winner.

Shocked to hear her name called, Pendergraft said the entire experience helped her refine her goals and get more serious about her craft. "I definitely need to practice a whole lot more," she said. "Each professional photographer expressed how important it is to self-assign. I need to practice more, play with angles, and in the process educate myself on what works and what doesn't."

While the entire conference was packed full of tips and techniques from world-renowned professionals, Pendergraft said it was the component of spiritual formation that really struck a chord with her. “This experience was life-changing for me,” she reflected. “Not just because of the photography, but also for how it helped my relationship with God. Every professional made sure they mentioned their relationship with God and how the scriptures spoke to them.

Photographer Patrick Murphrey-Racey made perhaps the biggest impression on Pendergraft. “He shared Psalm 37:4 with me, which states, ‘Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart,’” she quoted. “I really needed that reminder and I believe my work will be better and my message clearer with that in focus.”

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University seeks a higher ground in higher education – one that embraces faith and intellectual freedom, and inspires in students a love of learning, service, and leadership.